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ABSTRACT

The structural analysis of three short stories, arranged to proceed from an elementary to a complex level of form, can illuminate the secondary school student's understanding of literary structure. Representing plot as structure, the basic elements of Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" can be quickly reviewed to debate and establish the denouement and the theme that "life is for the strong." Illustrating theme as structure, Conrad Richter's "Early Marriage" has several rather easily distinguished structural motifs (e.g., the journey and the conquest of fear) whose specific details throw considerable light on the story's thematic structure. Exemplifying tone as structure, John Steinbeck's "Flight" can illustrate how the denouement is identified by the change in tone and how the structure is unified by such recurring images as the surf, the knife, the accumulation and concomitant loss of things, the color black, and Mama Torres' resignation. Steinbeck skillfully uses these and other images to evoke a larger reality in his work which even less gifted students can readily perceive. (JB)

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The Shape of Literature

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THREE SHORT STORIES which are popular in high schools today will serve to demonstrate how a student might progress in his understanding of literary structure, from an elementary to a complex level. On the first level, with emphasis on plot, is Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game;" on the second level, with emphasis not only on plot but on character, setting, and theme, is Conrad Richter's "Early Marriage;" and on the third level, is John Steinbeck's "Flight," a highly complex, unified whole into which is interwoven all elements of structure: theme, plot, character, setting, tone, symbol, ambiguity, and style.

Plot as Structure: First Level

In helping the student to organize his reading experiences, it seems unwise, for a first lesson in structure, to select a story which he has just read and which has given him values that are not yet clarified. What I have found ideal for a first lesson in structure is an old warhorse like Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game." I am not using the term in a pejorative sense, for everybody knows that students are delighted with the story when they first read it. By the tenth grade, however, sudents have enjoyed the story so many times that they titter when they see it once again in the table of contents of their anthology. They can no longer take the story seriously on the "visceral" level, but nevertheless can remember the important details because of the simplicity of its structure. Some students are surprised to learn that the story has additional important values.

I often use it for a review of the basic elements of the short story, and I let students in on that fact. (It gives us all a superiority complex, of course.) Students recall that the generating circumstance, or the incident which first piques the reader's curiosity and brings on rising action, is the one in which Rainsford falls off the boat; that characters and plot reduce ultimately to two major groups: those who are hunted and those who do the hunting; and that the speculation involves all of animated nature and not merely man, and the ethics of hunting as well. This story, although only slightly above the literal level, does move from the particular to the universal frame of reference: one of its themes, "Life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and, if need be, taken by the strong," has questionable ethics and therefore lends itself to rousing discussion; concepts such as *civilization* and *compassion* enter into even an elementary discussion of the story.

In spite of ease of analysis, however, even superior students often fail to distinguish the major climax, which is, after all, the point at which we ask, "Well, what has this story or play or novel actually been about?" There is often violent argument about this point, some selecting the point at which Rainsford leaps "far out into the sea," probably because on the "pit of the stomach" level that is the point of greatest emotional intensity and therefore of highest interest to the younger student, rather than the point at which Rainsford confronts Zaroff in the bedroom, which is the point to which the logic of expectation would rise and which is the logical outcome of the

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series of events with which the story has been involved. Very often, in dealing with plot, the student, deprived of the kind of intuitive guide that the pit of his stomach provides, fails to use his wits as well. He often sees as falling action what are still cause-effect relationships pointing toward the major climax and to the solution.

It is this arousing and fulfilling of desires that Kenneth Burke calls form in literature. A work has form, Burke tells us, "insofar as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence."[1] There can be no adequate gratification in this story unless the *hunter* and the *hunted* finally confront one another and resolve the problem.

Theme as Structure: Second Level

Theme as structure presents more difficulties, especially since most often a good story has more than one implicit theme. Conrad Richter's "Early Marriage," which is perhaps a level or two higher in complexity than Connell's, is a good example. In Richter's story the reader first becomes piqued by an initial incident in which Nancy Belle is seen packing and repacking her trunk. The reader soon finds out that Nancy Belle is being married the following Saturday, at a place called Gunstock, "two hundred miles away . . . five days' journey in a wagon . . . four in a saddle or buckboard." Several structural motifs come into focus: one strand focuses on the element of fear and of how the individual overcomes it; another strand focuses on the symbol of the journey itself. The climax of the motif of fear occurs in the wagon scene, when Nancy Belle, alone in the wagon at night, reaches finally for the axe with which to protect herself from the animals that she feels threaten her. Students generally recall this incident, because they feel a definite lessening of tension in the story from that point on. The main symbol of the story — the journey — is still in focus: Nancy must get herself and her trunk to her destination. But the tone (the expression of attitude implicit in the speaking voice) has changed so that the theme of fear becomes for the most part submerged. The reader must still go through a tension-filled river crossing, when the horses appear to stumble and drop out of sight; but whereas for awhile it was not certain by the tone whether or not the story would have a happy or a sad end, the change in tone now leads the reader to anticipate a happy outcome. If this story can be said to have a whole which is greater than its parts, then it might be that both the theme of the conquest of fear and the theme implicit in the symbol of the journey itself point to a richer life's journey for Nancy Belle and Stephen.

Richter's story lends itself to what Dwight L. Burton refers to as *abstract identification.*[2] Analysis of specific details in the story reveals significant thematic structure which even high school students of average ability can define: "Man's insignificance in the face of Nature," "Man's relationship to Nature: one of agreement rather than of unwise combat," "malignity and benignity of Nature pitted against one another," "Nature: a healer and a cleanser," and "Nature: a three-faced force." (These are excerpts from compositions written in one class on an assignment which compared the aspects of Nature in Richter's story with Jack London's "To Build a Fire.") Students such as these, who are capable of achieving such abstract or-

[1]Kenneth Burke, "Lexicon Rhetoricae" in Robert W. Stallman, ed., *Critiques and Essays in Criticism* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1949), p. 234.

[2]Dwight L. Burton, "Approaches to Intensive Study of the Novel," an address delivered at the Senior High School English Basic Institute, Los Angeles, October 20, 1962.

ganization of their reading experiences, would find themselves at a loss to explain structure at all, were we to hold them to the outdated concept of "form and content." There would be no answer to the question, "Where does content end and form begin?"

Tone as Structure: Third Level

It is important to distinguish tone, or the equivalent in writing to the speaking voice, from what we call mood or atmosphere (often represented by the kind of diction that focuses on texture, a purely sensory structure, whose main purpose is to evoke an emotional response). Perhaps one of the best short stories to use for analysis of tone as structure is John Steinbeck's "Flight." This story lends itself to very complex levels of analysis, but can be understood by the average student as well.

I became particularly interested in analyzing its structure because of a controversy that arose in my classroom when a student pointed out to me that one teacher had insisted that the climax of "Flight" came at the very end of the story, when Pepe, mortally wounded, falls in the gorge and is finally swallowed up by an avalanche of stones. Taking into consideration the main symbol of flight, a "logical" conclusion, based on expectation, would require some resolution of that aspect.

The story represents some difficulties to the less apt student in that the climax, from the standpoint of so-called "traditional" plot structure, actually takes place off-stage, so to speak: we are told of the stabbing by antecedent details related by Pepe when he comes back home. The student often finds it difficult to analyze plot details which are not in chronological order. If one considers as the climax of the short story (1) that point of highest interest or greatest emotional intensity and (2) that point at which the reader feels the action must take one turn or another, then it is clear that the climax is at the point where Pepe comes home on his *winded* horse, recounts his experiences, and tells his mother decisively that he must now go off to the mountains without any delay. The resolution of Pepe's problem takes place in a long falling action.

To illustrate how the change in tone helps to identify the climax, I present to students a dramatic reading of certain portions of the story, ending with the following excerpt:

> The moon went over the sky and the surf roared on the rocks. The roosters crowed the first call. The surf subsided to a whispering surge against the reef. The moon dropped toward the sea. The roosters crowed again.

The first part of the structure is unified by the surf image with which the story began, only now, instead of the violent imagery that is predominant in the beginning, the tone has subsided into one of peace: the cyclical aspects of Nature are emphasized, and Mama, Emilio, and Rosy have retired. They sleep.

Then the tone changes rather abruptly:

> The moon was near down to the water when Pepe rode on a winded horse to his home flat. His dog bounced out and circled the horse yelping with pleasure. Pepe slid off the saddle to the ground. The weathered little shack was silver in the moonlight and the square shadow of it was black to the north and east.

I present this portion orally and ask students to tell me what one word gives us a major clue to the change in tone. Invariably students respond with the word *winded*. To help students to understand this somewhat unorthodox structure, I ask them to analyze what happens in the story, to see if any further patterns emerge. With help, the students can understand two motifs: the patterns of *hope* and *despair*. What elements of action, or what things, I ask, seem to contribute to a controlling tone in the story prior to the first departure? Hope is symbolized,

first of all, by Pepe's inheritance from his father: the knife with the black handle. The rhythm of the structure soon focuses on the knife and what happens to it. What might the knife as *symbol* represent? Discussion can bring out many possibilities, such as

> Victory over Nature (technical mastery, *et al*)
>
> Knife can be used to hunt, fish, fashion objects, and so on.
>
> Victory over Man's limitations
>
> Pepe, for example, can achieve dignity and status as a man, in spite of background and environment.

The pattern of hope also involves the accumulation of things, prior to the trip Pepe will take when his mother says to him, "Pepe, I have a labor for thee." In teaching this pattern to students I draw a plot diagram on the board, and as we discuss this aspect, I insert the items in the plot which represent the pattern of hope: Pepe acquires the horse, for instance, and his father's saddle, the hatband on the hat, the silk green handkerchief (green as color symbolism can imply hope). Mama Torres hands him the big medicine bottle and the silver coins, saying "That for the medicine . . . and that for the salt. That for a candle to burn for the papa. That for dulces for the little ones." To articulate the tone of hope, I read aloud certain passages of dialogue.

The pattern of despair, on the other hand, has as its concomitant the loss of things, ironically beginning with the knife, which "went almost by itself." This time Pepe starts out on his journey wearing his father's black coat. The structure is obviously one of parallel and contrast; black becomes the predominant color and articulates the tone of despair.

> Moonlight and daylight fought with each other, and the two warring qualities made it difficult to see. Before Pepe had gone a hundred yards, the outlines of his figure were misty; and long before he entered the canyon, he had become a gray, indefinite shadow.

After he is out of sight Mama begins the "high, whining keen of the death wail":

> It was the formal wail. It rose to a high piercing whine and subsided to a moan. Mama raised it three times and then turned and went into the house and shut the door.

It is important for students to reflect on the meaning of the word *formal*, which suggests the kind of grief which accepts the finality of things. With Mama there is neither hope nor despair, for "these things are." Even her mourning must accept the limitations. Between the two themes of hope and despair there is Mama Torres, who seems to suggest a further pattern – the pattern of acceptance, which is established at once in the tone of the first two paragraphs of the story and which is in marked contrast to the violence of Nature: the white waters *hiss* as the ocean hits the coast; the sounds of Nature, the "*rattling*, rotting" barn, imply harshness. (The obvious snake imagery adds to the tone of violence.) The setting is an integral part of structure, and the harsh rhythms of certain aspects of inanimate nature contrast with the feeble attempts of man to exert control over it. The violence which is emphasized also in animate nature is implicit in the incident revealed by the speaking voice, that Pepe's father had tripped on a stone and fallen full length on a rattlesnake. "These things are."

This three-part structure is established by considering the importance of scale, noting how much emphasis is given to certain details which emerge finally as specific motifs. The motif of acceptance is emphasized by giving it a prominent position in the first two paragraphs of the story. I ask students to re-read those first paragraphs and I ask them, also, why they think that Steinbeck chose a word like *ancient* in the following:

> Mama Torres, a lean, dry woman with ancient eyes, had ruled the farm for ten years, ever since her husband tripped over a stone in the field one day and fell full length on a rattlesnake. When one is bitten on the chest there is not much that can be done.

Why didn't Steinbeck use a word like *old*, for instance? Students almost invariably respond that Steinbeck might have been trying to say that Mama had "gone through a lot," and more than that, Mama may represent a long tradition of suffering and acceptance of life. ("When one is bitten on the chest, there is not much that can be done.") The tone of the paragraph, if the selection is read aloud, reveals unmistakably what is to be one of the controlling tones in the story — resignation.

At this point there is almost always a question like, "Did Steinbeck know that he was using the word *ancient* in that sense?" The question is an intelligent one. (The student is seeking assurance that the analysis can be justified.) There is this answer: the eye image keeps vibrating in the consciousness; it is obviously more than a mere image of texture, for it impinges on a larger reality than Steinbeck overtly reveals. It clues us at once to the controlling tone of the story. The usage also departs from ordinary expectations. Besides, it touches off a similar response in other students, and it eventually *feels right* when considered in the entire intellectual and emotional context of the story. The eye image is an integral part of a structured, unified whole. It is important, however, that the student *experience* the content through communicative oral reading of key passages, for the reader of high school age cannot be expected to respond to so complex a structural element as tone without hearing the speaking voice:

> . . . for who knows when the toothache will come, or the sadness of the stomach. These things are.

"Flight" lends itself to a good deal more mature analysis for superior students. One can, for instance, deal more fully with color symbolism, or with the analogical relationship to Nature which is implicit in this story, as in so many of Steinbeck's works. From the analogy to Nature a further reinforcement of the patterns I have discussed emerges, focusing again ultimately on the theme of acceptance, for it is in accepting that one has a measure of control over one's destiny. Pepe, too, if he is to achieve his destiny, if he is to become "a man when a man is needed," must accept the challenge which his environment and his heritage have placed upon him. "These things are."

If, then, a work has form insofar as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part and to be gratified by the sequence, then there is no question but that "Flight," although it can be considered a complex structure, may be understood and appreciated by even immature readers. Even the student of average sensitivity senses at once that although part of his consciousness may yearn for a happy ending, to be offered such gratification would offend not only his emotion but his intellect. He would be required to abandon the larger reality of form which he has experienced.

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